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Voices of experience

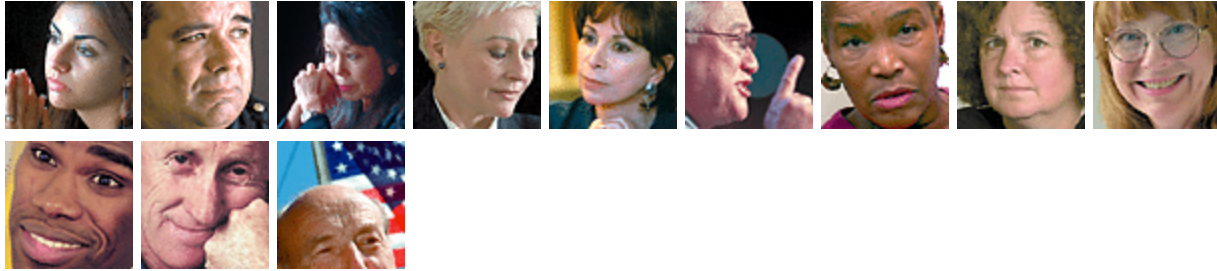
Bay Area residents reflect on the future while reliving the moment that changed it

As the shock wears off, new emotions surface

Sunday, September 16, 2001

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URL: <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2001/09/16/LV229802.DTL>



In the Bay Area, we are fortunate to share one of the nation's most diverse communities. Because of this, every event, whether triumph or tragedy, creates a spectrum of views and emotions. The terrorism on Tuesday, while unifying the nation in shock, were no exception.

The best way to begin healing is to begin talking. The Chronicle asked a cross-section of Bay Area residents ... from educators to students, rescue workers to entertainers, athletes to businesspeople ... where they were when they heard the news and how it has changed their lives.

CARLOS BOLANOS, REDWOOD CITY POLICE CHIEF

I was at the Pacific Athletic Club in Redwood Shores, and I saw an extraordinary number of people huddled around a TV. One plane had gone into the World Trade Center. It wasn't determined it was an attack at that point, so I left to do my workout, a kickboxing class. I'm not one of these guys who'd stop everything and say, "Oh my God!" I've been doing police work for 21 years; I'm not trained to react like that. I don't have that luxury.

When I came back, information had gone out that the crashes appeared to be a planned terrorist attack. I was thinking immediately what that might mean for us -- recognizing that there's not a definite link to the West Coast, but in the minds of residents I knew there would be a lot of fear we'd have to manage.

Years ago, I was sent out to a "man with a gun" call at Hyatt Richeys in Palo Alto. Those are the times you wish you had a regular job, in an office. But all those poor guys at the World Trade Center worked in an office. You may as well work at what you chose to do, and take the good with the bad.

JEANNE COMASKEY, DIRECTOR OF THE FORT MASON YOUTH HOSTEL

I'll never forget that moment when I was walking to work and the cafe manager at the hostel, Ciran McFeeny, came running out, shaking and shouting what he'd just heard. We have a capacity of 165 visitors at the hostel, 90 percent of them international travelers, and they were panicked, literally gasping and crying and trying to get to the four telephones to call home. The TV was on in the cafe, and as they watched, they were terrified.

I just did the best I could to join with staff people and try to answer questions. There was a long line for the phones, and at the same time, terrified parents from all over the world were trying to call us to see if their kids were all right.

In a strange way I suddenly felt that even facing all the horror of the days ahead, I was doing something that was helpful and that the mission of the hostelling movement was more clear than ever, to promote international understanding and peace, and denounce hatred and violence. The next day, I really felt good about going to work -- even though our business might suffer, and tourism in general will be hurt, I think what I can do to help visitors, who are essentially stranded here, is positive.

As for the future, I think people are going to be very leery about traveling, at least by plane. I have to travel a lot myself, and I personally don't think I'll ever feel the same level of safety or security again.

ISABEL ALLENDE, AUTHOR, SAN RAFAEL

I was in the shower and my mother called from Chile, where they were watching the news. So we turned on the TV and saw the horror going on. The eerie coincidence is that Sept. 11 was the same exact date of the Chilean coup in 1973 that overthrew my uncle's (Salvatore Allende's) government. We now know that the CIA was probably involved in that coup. This was such a strange thing to witness. It brought back a lot of memories of that time -- the fire engines, the sirens. It was very scary and quite awful.

The United States has never truly been invaded or bombed, and people feel very safe here. But that feeling of being invulnerable is going to change. I come from a life where there has been no safety, and this is the way life is for people all over the world. But you still fall in love, you still get married, you still have babies, you still make plans. People will adapt. But I really am very sorry to see that sense of invulnerability go.

JOHN KOERNER, SEARCH DOG HANDLER, BELMONT

I'd just woken up and gotten dressed. It was close to 6 a.m. I turned on the TV like I always do and then saw the first plane go into the tower and the second plane go in. I thought it was a rerun of the first. I knew it was serious when two planes went into the towers.

I was at the Northridge quake, so I knew that it was going to be a real mess (in New York) when the towers started imploding upon themselves. I started thinking about it: "Oh no, all those policemen and firemen and rescue personnel, they're dead." You try not to relive stuff like that. My dog is not certified right now or I would have been ready to go.

The enormity has hit me -- it's something that's really bad. But you've got to learn to live with it. If you're in this search and rescue business and it bothers you, you'd better get out.

RHODESSA JONES, SAN FRANCISCO PERFORMANCE ARTIST, DIRECTOR AND AUTHOR

I got a call from a friend who works with me on the Medea Project about 6:45, 6:20 in the morning. She said, "Girl, they are blowing up the World Trade Center!" I just said, "What?" and I flipped on the TV and I sat in front of that box until 3:30 the next morning.

I have never seen anything like this in my lifetime, but I put it up there with Attica. My brother Stephen was in Attica when it was firebombed. And when Colin Powell did not go to Durban for that conference on racism, I knew we were in trouble. I said to myself, "This is connected to the awesome hand of God."

The United States plays some really nasty politics on the international scene, and in some ways this really is chickens coming home to roost. We have been awakened from our slumber and it's a terrible thing. God be with us all. I hope we will treat each other tenderly.

SABA MOEEL, UCLA FRESHMAN AND WEB DESIGNER, EL CERRITO

Like many people my age, I was in bed when the World Trade Center was hit. The phone rang and a friend alerted me to the devastation happening across the country. I turned on the TV: A passenger plane crashing into a skyscraper. Downtown New York covered in dust and smoke. People screaming through the streets like a scene from a science fiction movie. My heart sank as I remembered Oklahoma City.

Of course, I was sad and disgusted. But not surprised -- Kaczinski and McVeigh are household names. Now someone had launched a counterattack on the U. S. Whoever did this felt so abused by this country that they thought extreme violence was the only way to get politicians' attention.

But why was Channel 2 News immediately telling me that Israel felt "sorrow and solidarity," while the Palestinians were dancing in the streets? This coverage not only exploited the dead victims in New York, but also portrayed Arabs as heartless people. Arabs in Palestine are also dying as a result of U. S. policies.

I haven't always seen the world this way. A younger version of myself would demand retribution. But now I realize if violence brings more violence, we will never make peace. Other things have changed for me, too. Not only do I look at this tragic event with horror, but also with hope -- hope that this is the beginning of a new era. An era where people won't resort to senseless killing and suicide for their voices to be heard.

MICK MCDONALD, PALO ALTO FIRE DEPARTMENT BATTALION CHIEF

I found out when my clock radio went off at 5:30 in the morning. They said a plane had flown into the World Trade Center. I didn't bolt up, but I turned the TV on. Then I heard about the second plane. That raised the red flag: Two planes just do not fly into the World Trade Center.

Watching the big fire, I was thinking, "That's a major fire problem. You're setting up to fight a fire in the tower and now you have to fight a fire in the second tower." Fortunately, it was happening in a place that has a lot of resources like fire engines and ladders and equipment associated with fighting a high-rise fire.

When the plane went in there, you felt for the people in the plane. Then when it collapses and kills the people in the same profession you are, it strikes home pretty hard as well. It's not unusual for firefighters to get killed in the line of duty, but it's pretty unusual when that many get killed in one incident.

When I first got hired on, my job was strictly about fighting fires. Nowadays, the fire service has changed. You're doing medical calls, hazardous material calls, and terrorism. It's a much larger spectrum than when I got hired on.

JANICE WALES, UNITED FLIGHT ATTENDANT

I came home Monday from Japan at 11:30 in the morning and was up for a while. I unpacked and later in the afternoon went to bed . . . My phone rang at 7:30 in the morning and I looked at my caller ID and it was my sister. I thought, "Why is she calling? She knows not to call me this early." So I ignored it. Then I got up and watched CNN and thought, "What are they doing, rehashing that old bombing of the (World Trade Center) towers?"

I was so confused. I called Beverly, my friend. She's a hairdresser. I said,

"What's going on? I can't believe two American Airlines flights have crashed. She said, "Janice, two United Airlines flights crashed also."

I just lost it; I had to hang up. And then I was glued to the TV.

The breach of security in the United States stunned me. The biggest fear in my industry is terrorism. Fire, and terrorism. We're briefed on this constantly, taught as much as possible how to act. And if it's a suicide mission for terrorists, we know we're not going to live.

Right now I am terrified. I am supposed to fly in a few days . . . but I will do it. I will not quit.

Security is going to be so tight I can't even imagine. And that will be good. It's a hard lesson for us to learn in the U.S.

JANICE MIRIKITANI, SAN FRANCISCO POET

I was in bed and Cecil came in around 7 and told me they just bombed the World Trade Center. And I went what? I looked at the TV and I said, "My God, this is not real -- this is a special effect, maybe they're making a movie." It took me about 5 minutes to realize this is really happening. I had to see the plane smash into the building 10 or 15 times before I finally got it. And then I started crying.

Unfortunately -- and it sounds very trite -- but I really realized how much we take for granted. We keep thinking nothing bad is going to happen. It made me want to be in touch with the people I love; I

wanted to stay close to Cecil that day.

But I was also appalled by the references to Pearl Harbor. I was in a (internment) camp myself. When I first heard this, I wanted to scream out, "You can't keep villainizing people!" You're referring to an event 50 years ago that all Japanese Americans were appalled by. You have to be able to separate out terrorists from governments. I hope this doesn't come down on the Arabs.

Of course you're angry and you want to react, but you have to ask yourself, what responsibility does America have in this? How have we undermined peace throughout the world ourselves?

COMPOSER JOHN ADAMS, BERKELEY

I'm in London working on a film of my opera "The Death of Klinghoffer." We were in a vocal rehearsal, working on the final scene of the opera; it's this terrible scene where Marilyn Klinghoffer has been told that her husband's been killed and she's left with this desperate sense of emptiness.

I left the room to call a cab. There was a television in the front lobby, with a few people clustered around it, so I went over to see. It was like the moment we found out JFK was shot. You remember it for the rest of your life.

Everyone here is profoundly disturbed and very sympathetic. People hear my accent and come up to me and express their support and sympathies. It's very moving.

In the short term, this will be very disturbing. I hope we don't create a fortress mentality and have a sort of McCarthy-period sense of paranoia. But I think before this happened there seemed to be a feeling among the present administration of closing in and becoming more isolated from world events, and this clearly shows that the only way to solve these problems is through engagement and understanding.

CONGRESSMAN MIKE HONDA, D-SAN JOSE, WHO WAS IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

I was getting ready to go to a budget briefing. I was in my bedroom at my apartment. My communications director, Ernest, called me and said, "Turn on your TV." I saw the plane coming around the two towers and I just could not believe what I saw. It was like fiction becoming non-fiction, it was like watching a movie put together by a digital special effects but it wasn't, it was real.

I was walking around Wednesday and you don't see a plane in the air. When a helicopter or jet plane goes over, everyone looks up in the sky. It reminded me I grew up responding to the air raid signals, with the automatic duck and cover, with the fear of the atom bomb. As I grew up, I thought, "Why should I have a family and bring children into this world full of gloom and the possibility of nuclear holocaust?" As I grew older, I realized that hope and work, good works, is what changes the world.

Warren Christopher, the former Secretary of State, said that we have to remember not to repeat our history -- where in 1941, we targeted one racial group. That, to me, was a critical comment, because it rings true for me and for our communities. We have to be particularly vigilant that during this time of tenseness that we don't allow our civil liberties to be disregarded. In spite of the attack, on our own soil, we still are a nation of laws, we have a Constitution.

IRIS CHANG, AUTHOR OF "THE RAPE OF NANKING," SAN JOSE

I was in bed suffering from a mild case of the flu, which I'd gotten after speaking at a conference last week in San Francisco called "50 Years of Denial:

Japan and her Wartime Responsibilities." My husband woke me with the news. It turns out that my uncle had walked through the WTC a minute before it collapsed! It was very scary.

Strangely, it made me feel sicker. I cried, got a terrible headache, but eventually started calling friends in New York, who thankfully are all OK. Just that day I had been planning to write an open letter to Colin Powell, after hearing him speak on TV of wartime issues, about the death toll in the Japanese war of aggression and the peace treaty of 1951. I was so angry.

After this, I think certainly that airport security will be tightened. And I think if the U.S. decides to bomb another country, it will be done with a sense of moral righteousness, which concerns me. I also think this will give the government the opportunity to erode our rights. They've been talking about the need for us to curtail individual rights for the greater security of the country, and that chills me to the bone.

They called this an act of war. But this is not war; it is terrorism. The hawkish elements of our government want to retaliate, but we should act prudently, so that the world knows that we do not also perform acts of terrorism. In my experience, the most dangerous threat to democracy is too much power in the hands of an elite few.

STEWART BRAND, FOUNDER OF THE WHOLE EARTH CATALOG, MARIN

I was sleeping on our tugboat (moored in Richardson Bay). My wife's sister called from Salt Lake, which woke my wife up, and we went down and looked at the television -- it was after the first plane, but before the second plane hit.

The great difference between this and Pearl Harbor is that then everybody knew what to do -- if you were a man, you went down and signed up. If you were a woman, you encouraged him. What I'm sure of is that people want to do something, but after giving blood, what else is there?

One scenario I'm entertaining is that the best thing they can do to defy the terrorists is to personally help the economy -- go out and hire somebody, or go shopping, or buy stock, or generally do individual stuff that relates to the economy as a whole.

This is something that responds to a negative with a positive, and the idea of patriotically shopping has sort of an amusement factor to it, but in fact it's real. By going after the World Trade Center, the terrorists were trying to bring the American economy down.

ANTAWN JAMISON, TEAM CAPTAIN OF THE GOLDEN STATE WARRIORS

I didn't wake up until about 9, so it was already noon on the East Coast. A friend called and asked if I had heard what had happened. Then I actually turned on the TV and saw the footage, saw the damage, and I remember thinking that all the tough things we think we are going through are nothing compared to this.

I was going to go to the practice facility to work out, but I was like, "Work out for what?" There was no way. I went in Wednesday because my mind frame was to get back to normal as soon as possible. The people that did this wanted us to grieve.

I can't watch TV any more. It is just a constant reminder. Here I am out playing basketball and you've got people trapped under concrete and people don't know if their family is alive or dead.

You never imagine this is going to happen in the United States of America.

NIHAL NAZIM KHAN, SENIOR MEMBER OF THE SAN RAMON ISLAMIC CENTER

My nephew works in a building very, very close to the World Trade Center and we were worried about his life. He is OK, but you wonder how many people of different colors and religions died in those buildings. I pray that people won't blame people of Islamic faith.

Anyone, Islamic or otherwise, who acted like this should be acted against in the strongest way. This is very, very tragic. You cannot do this in the name of religion. No religion I know of can ever condone anything like this.

I think, frankly, that most Americans are fair people and won't make quick judgments about who is responsible. Muslims are affected by this just like anyone else in the United States.

TUYET BUI, 71, FOUNDER OF LE CHEVAL IN OAKLAND

(Since her English is halting, some of her words were translated by her grandson, Quan Tran, 27.)

I was sleeping and my son went into my room and woke me up and told me to watch the tragic news. It was about 7 o'clock. I went and I watched TV and I don't understand English too much. I see the picture, the airplane go in. I hurt.

Since then, I can't sleep. I just watch TV, night and day. I hurt because people, people, people hurt, people die. Like me. I am people, too. When the plane hit the building, it was scary. The plane hit and I know thousands and thousands people die.

I lived in South Vietnam. I lived in the big city, Saigon. Most of the fighting was outside the city. I see a little bit bombing. Nothing like the World Trade Center. Vietnam was different. This is worse because of innocent people. Nobody was enemies with nobody.

SINGER-SONGWRITER COUNTRY JOE MCDONALD, BERKELEY

I was at home. My daughter called on the phone to say something had happened and we started watching it on television at home after the kids went to school. We decided not to do it too much, but we watched it unfold like everyone else did all day long.

Everyone's calling it Pearl Harbor. I see it as the Tet Offensive myself. You can take that any way you want. I wasn't a person who wished the Tet Offensive upon the American forces in Vietnam, but before the Tet Offensive we were invincible and after the Tet Offensive we were vulnerable. And now we are vulnerable and we're all wondering how could this have happened to the good guys?

I'll never see casualty rates the same way again. You must remember that 58,000 Americans were killed in 15 years in Vietnam and the twin towers hold 50,000 people. I don't even know that the definition of the word "war," which has been thrown around, even applies. Before, war was nation state against nation state and set-piece battles. But this could have been just a bunch of people who got a bad idea.

ALANA TUPASI, REGISTERED NURSE FOR THE BLOOD CENTERS OF THE PACIFIC

We were at a blood drive down at the California state building. We had opened up real early and we had a few donors coming in, and then they told us they were going to close the building and that we should get out.

When our blood drive got canceled, we thought, "Well, that's it for the day. " But already at 8 a.m. in the morning, people were gathering, wanting to help.

They weren't doing it because it was the cool place to be or because this is fun, but because they wanted to do something. I was so inspired. Instead of saying, "Woe is me," or something negative, they were thinking, "What can I do that is positive?"

There were people who had never donated blood, people who hardly knew that they could donate blood, people who can barely speak English, young people, people who are barely 110 pounds, which is our minimum weight.

People were crying, they were upset and sad, but they were here. I thought, "Wow. Humans are OK." I feel honored that I can help out all these people who want to do this, and help the people who need the blood.

MARK PAULINE, FOUNDER OF SAN FRANCISCO ARTS GROUP THAT USES WARFARE

TECHNOLOGY

I was sleeping in the shop here, and my roommate woke me up about 7 o'clock.

I watched the news all day. It certainly had an immediate impact on me and my work. We were scheduled to do a major show at the end of October, part of the L.A. Fest. The Board of Supervisors in L.A. had given us a variance. Now they say we can't do it. That was our main show for the fall,

As someone who deals with the language of terror and fear, unfortunately acts like these are going to make it difficult for me. I think it's fitting to talk about these things, but the line between satirizing and the real thing is diminishing. I think it will result in more art going down the vanilla route.

I'm interested in a way of life where you can talk about extreme things. When people cross over that line, they reduce the possibility of doing that. It's going to get very grim (in the arts world) in the next years.

URSULA THRUSH, SAN FRANCISCO MONTESSORI SCHOOL FOUNDER

I was in bed, turning on the TV. I myself am a war refugee, from Hungary. World War II was played out in our backyard, so the horror of war was brought back to me in an instant. I hadn't thought about it in a long time.

I realized, first of all, that my experiences were in wartime. This is supposed to be peace. Secondly, airplanes were these wonderful machines that took us places. And now they have become weapons loaded with people. It's a quantum leap in our way of thinking.

Montessori, in general, and I, in particular, are very interested in peace education. That's what we're practicing in our schools constantly. Consequently, it really hits very deep to me, because it seems like the few baby steps we've taken toward peace in the last few years have been set back with this catastrophe -- centuries, maybe.

It's absolutely natural that people will respond with feelings of retaliation and hatred. We're trying very hard to get closer to something called unconditional love, acceptance of all the people of world. And it's very difficult.

That's why it's important to speak with the children, to discuss what happened. Just to tell them there are bad people and evil in the world, and that we don't want to join that. It's always our choice how we're going to react. That's the most basic thought we can give our children.

ASHOK RAMNIRMAL, 27, A SOFTWARE ENGINEER IN ONE OF THE TALLEST OFFICE

BUILDINGS IN OAKLAND

I took my shower. I'm walking. CNN is on. It's 6:30 a.m. I saw this one building, smoke is coming out, there's a big hole. Then I see the airplane is going into the second one. I'm like numb. You don't feel what you're seeing. It's unbelievable. Everything is like a movie.

I work on 10th floor here. I've been here three months. I asked someone else: "Where's the staircase?" I passed that information on to everybody.

This scares me a lot. I'm from India. I've seen a lot of car bombs from terrorists. That first day, I was scared to open my car. I don't think people will enjoy life the same. Anyone who wants to fly will think twice. I used to feel the U.S. is the safest country. No more.

JT LEROY, AUTHOR, SAN FRANCISCO

Juliana Hatfield called me to tell me what had happened. She was in Boston and left me a message and I called her back.

I feel weird about it, maybe like what people felt during the 1989 earthquake, where people feel more of a bond with other people because of the tragedy. But at the same time, there is this strange undercurrent of rage, which people may not have felt in 1989. I mean, who do you have rage toward in an earthquake? Mother Earth?

There is also a lot of doomsday stuff out there. Because of my background, I have a propensity to believe things like that. It's easy to start reading things from the Bible and start believing it's World War III or the end of the world. But it also puts things into perspective. Recently, I've been annoyed because people are writing all this gossip about my life and it's not true. But then you realize there are bigger, more important things in the world than writing gossip about people's lives.

At the same time, it makes it hard to go on with little things. I was calling someone the other day complaining because my pictures didn't come out right, but then there are people who have lost their whole families. There is so much incongruity in this, that in some other parts of the country, there is complete devastation, but here, we don't think it's touched us. But it has, and I feel like I owe something more.

DEBORAH MARTIN-BUTLER, OUTREACH CONSULTANT AT OAKLAND HIGH SCHOOL

It was on the news that morning. I watch TV news in the morning. It was 6, 6:30. I kept asking, "Is this real? Is this real?" My husband had to go over the Bay Bridge. He asked: "Should I go? Should I stay? Is this going to happen here?"

Tuesday, the public schools in Oakland were open. I'm not sure if there was a lesson plan in the classrooms. The students I saw were very sad. It brought up other issues in their lives that were depressing to them.

This sense of sadness leaves you speechless. I've had an overall gloomy feeling. I've been very emotional when I listen to their problems.

Overall, I have to believe, be optimistic when dealing with children. We have to give them optimism.

CHEB I SABBAH, WORLD MUSIC DJ, SAN FRANCISCO:

I woke up at 9:20 a.m. Tuesday, and there were six messages on my machine from friends telling me I'd better check the news because something really horrible had happened in New York. I was half asleep when I turned on the TV and saw one of the World Trade Center towers falling.

My first reaction was horror. I grew up with war in Algeria, and I saw that this was war again -- only much bigger. Since then, between TV and radio, I haven't turned the news off except to sleep.

I don't know how this is going to affect me. I haven't been out since Tuesday. I'm not afraid, but I have told my son to be careful, even though he speaks and functions like an American because he grew up here.

I've mostly been fine as an Algerian in California, but if a redneck goes out there with a machete -- I can understand the outrage and the desire to retaliate, but violence only begets violence. And that violence comes from all sides, wherever there are victims.

It's going to be a confusing time. Recently I was thinking we had taken a step forward in promoting Arabic culture and that there was an opening in the American conscience. Music has always been a healer. But when I saw the news, I thought, "OK, one step forward, 10 steps backward."

People in America don't know the difference between Pakistanis, Persians or Afghans. They don't know who's an Arab and who isn't, or the difference between these cultures.

I know it sounds utopian, but this is the time to analyze and critique violence, and take this opportunity to actually break the barriers down so that people can understand who is who in all this confusion. If we don't, false notions will continue to be perpetuated and the madness will continue.

Statements were gathered by the following Chronicle staff writers: Neva Chonin, Laura Compton, Marianne Constantinou, Robin Davis, Jane Ganahl, Bob Graham, Robert Hurwitt, Joshua Kosman, Craig Marine, C.W. Nevius, Pati Poblete, James Sullivan, Joel Selvin, Peter Stack, Ulysses Torassa, David Wiegand and Carlyne Zinko.

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